

Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press Incorporated 2007
Toronto Buffalo London
Printed in Canada

ISBN-13: 978-0-8020-9412-4 (paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-8020-9133-8 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-8020-9412-0 (paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8020-9133-4 (cloth)



Printed on acid-free paper

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Beaty, Bart

Unpopular culture : transforming the European comic book in the
1990s/Bart Beaty.

(Studies in book and print culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8020-9133-8 (bound)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8020-9412-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-8020-9133-4 (bound)

ISBN-10: 0-8020-9412-0 (pbk.)

I. Comic books, strips, etc – Europe – History and criticism. I. Title.
II. Series.

PN6710.B42 2007 741.5'9409049 C2006-903810-4

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its
publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario
Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to
Scholarly Publications Programme, using funds provided by the Social
Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its
publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book
Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

Chapter 5

Autobiography as Authenticity

Je dessine les gens pour vivre psychiquement un peu plus à leur côté.
C'est l'inverse du fantasme.

Fabrice Neaud¹

A three-page short story by Lewis Trondheim published in *Lapin* #26 outlines the stakes at play in contemporary autobiographical comics. Trondheim's autobiographical essay, 'Journal du journal du journal' (figure 14) is a peculiar mise-en-abyme. Trondheim begins by depicting himself reading page 241 of Fabrice Neaud's autobiographical novel *Journal (III)* (Ego Comme X, 1999). On that page, Neaud depicts himself reading Dupuy and Berberian's autobiographical novel *Journal d'un album* (L'Association, 1994), specifically pages 57 through 59. At that point in *Journal d'un album*, Philippe Dupuy depicts a momentous intersection in his personal and professional life. Having chosen, with his partner Charles Berberian, to undertake an autobiographical comic book detailing the creation of the third book in their *M. Jean* series, Dupuy shows a number of early pages to his colleagues in L'Association. Their assessment of the work is rather tough, noting that the work seems to have lost its rhythm and that it could be done more concisely. Returning home, he falls into a despairing dream before being awakened by a phone call from his father informing him that his mother has passed away. The following page encapsulates his mother's life in just six images, recalling the advice that Trondheim offers in the story: 'You could do it in one page.'²

Reading this passage in *Journal (III)*, Neaud is impressed by Dupuy's work, but finds himself enraged by the comments offered by the mem-



14 Lewis Trondheim reads Fabrice Neaud reading Philippe Dupuy. From *Lapin* #26.

bers of L'Association. He suggests that their inappropriate remarks may be a displacement of their inability to be interested in the lives of other people. Visually, through the use of a non-diegetic intercut, he associates the intemperate observations of the L'Association artists with the dismissive commentaries on his own work that are levelled at him by his close friend and love interest, Dominique, thereby casting aspersions on their motives.

Trondheim's essay is an exact replica of Neaud's page, drawn in Trondheim's style. Visually, the page's seven-panel grid is recreated, and the figures are placed in identical positions. Further, Trondheim duplicates the narration, shifting the details slightly from Neaud's commentary on Dupuy and L'Association, to Trondheim's commentary on Neaud's commentary on Dupuy and L'Association. Where Neaud was shocked at the opinions offered by L'Association on Dupuy's work, Trondheim is shocked that Neaud would make such basic judgments about their roles as editors and publishers. On the second page of Trondheim's essay, which again visually reiterates Neaud's page, he rereads his own first page and finds himself shocked that he would make such a rash judgment of Neaud's work. The work potentially recedes to infinity as Trondheim comments on his own commentary regarding Neaud's commentary on L'Association's comments about Dupuy's self-reflexive work. The game is in play; the text is never finished but always ripe for reinterpretation.

Clearly, Trondheim approaches the question of the autobiographical essay in a satiric and toying manner, playing with the similarities between the titles of the books and the closeness of the content initiated by Neaud. At the same time, however, his work contains a few barbs that suggest it is something more than mere whimsy. Where Neaud depicts Dominique dismissing all autobiographical writing with the phrase '*The Diary of Anne Frank*, that pisses me off. I find it badly written,'³ Trondheim reacts to L'Association president Jean-Christophe Menu's dismissal of the mainstream genre comics of Jean Van Hamme this way: '*XIII*, that pisses me off. I find it badly written.'⁴ This transition re-centres the discussion away from the concerns of autobiography to those of the small press. This is an entirely apt displacement. Since the beginning of the 1990s, autobiography has become an increasingly prominent genre within the small-press and independent comics scene, with strengths in a number of European nations. Indeed, autobiography has become the genre that most distinctly defines the small-press comics production of

Europe in its current revitalization. Specifically, a number of cartoonists have made the narrativization of comic book production a central signifier of authenticity in the contemporary European small-press scene.

Central to the study of autobiography has been the project of defining it as a genre distinct from biography and fiction. Philippe Lejeune's often-cited definition of the genre is widely regarded as normative: 'Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.'⁵ Lejeune's definition has, of course, opened up a number of challenges, and the policing of the boundaries of autobiography in relation to other literary forms has become a major undertaking. Indeed, it is fair to say that the study of autobiography is dominated by inquiries into the particular traits of autobiography and comparisons between autobiography and other literary forms.⁶ Paul de Man, writing in 1979, indicated how these assumptions had driven the study of autobiography down a dead end:

The theory of autobiography is plagued by a recurrent series of questions and approaches that are not simply false, in the sense that they take for granted assumptions about autobiographical discourse that are in fact highly problematic. They keep therefore being stymied, with predictable monotony, by sets of problems that are inherent in their own use. One of these problems is the attempt to define and to treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre among others.⁷

For de Man and others, theories of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and feminism have called into question the self-evident nature of the subject and knowledge. Post-structuralism in particular had deposed the unified subject of autobiography by positing discourse as preceding and exceeding the subject, calling the very basis of the genre's distinctiveness into question.⁸ Nonetheless, the study of autobiography continues to dwell upon the questions that de Man sought to vacate, often complicating notions of 'truth' and 'self' in light of current theorizing, but proceeding with that work of definition all the same.

Two ideas predominate in the study of autobiography: the relation of the text to historical truth and the relation of the text to the conventions of biography. Timothy Dow Adams, for example, argues, 'a promise to tell the truth is one of autobiography's earliest premises.'⁹ He suggests that autobiography is an attempt to reconcile one's life with one's self

and that therefore the core of autobiography is not historical accuracy but metaphorical truth. Philippe Lejeune identifies the ‘referential pact’ as central to the process of autobiography:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a ‘reality’ exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not ‘the effect of the real,’ but the image of the real. All referential texts thus entail what I will call a ‘referential pact,’ implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim.¹⁰

This focus on the issue of truth – whether metaphorical or historical, simple verisimilitude or ‘resemblance to the truth’ – fundamentally deadens the instrumentality of autobiography study. As critics have narrowed the debate to the precise definition of genre, it has become trapped in merely formal questions.

The creation of autobiographical works, particularly in terms of how the form has been understood and mobilized by contemporary European comic book producers, is better thought of as a social process. Autobiography, with its implicit claims to replicate the ‘real world,’ stands in stark contrast to a European comic book heritage that has celebrated adventurous boy reporters, wisecracking Gaulish adventurers, cowboys, astronauts, and other heroes of escapist literature. Indeed, the central issue relating to the use of autobiography in contemporary comics is not whether it can be demonstrated that L’Association actually criticized Dupuy’s comics or that Neaud reacted violently to reading these critiques, but rather how various authors have adopted autobiographical work as a distinctive device that sets them apart from the normative elements of the comics market.

The importance of autobiography in the field of contemporary comic book production stems at least in part from the renewed importance of the genre in the field of French literature in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, autobiographical comics derive much of their importance from their insertion of modes of visibility into an increasingly legitimated literary genre. Writing about autobiographical tendencies in contemporary French painting, Monique Yaari suggests that the turning point for autobiography – which had been devalored by modernism – occurred

in 1975 with the publication of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Georges Perec's *W*, and Philippe Lejeune's *Pacte autobiographique*. Subsequent years saw the release of Michel Beaujour's *Miroirs d'encre* (1980) and autobiographies from noted French intellectuals Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Similarly, in the field of painting a number of shows focusing on the self-portrait also helped to revitalize the genre in the 1970s.¹¹ Thierry Groensteen has argued that French autobiographical cartoonists drew inspiration from this revitalization of the self-portrait and the autobiography, as well as from innovative forms of autobiographical cinema, such as those by Jean-Luc Godard, Nanni Moretti, and Cyril Collard.¹² If autobiography was in the air – and, more importantly, in the art schools – in the early 1990s, what did the new generation of cartoonists hope to achieve by adopting its form? Of all the neglected literary forms, why autobiography?

In the first instance, autobiography is the genre that offers the most explicit promise of legitimizing cartoonists as authors. The death of the author pronounced by Roland Barthes in the 1960s was confirmed in the decades that followed, as Janet Staiger has pointed out, by the prevalence of post-structuralist criticism and the ubiquity of a mass-mediated marketplace of ideas.¹³ According to Michel Foucault, the author-function continued to exist to the extent that the concept upheld bourgeois sensibilities about art.¹⁴ For cartoonists, this assertion functioned as a promise. If cartoonists could assert their own identities as authors by conforming to these sensibilities and meet the expectations placed on artists in other fields, their social position could be improved. For cartoonists an important precursor in this regard was cinema, a medium in which the development of an auteur theory had created the social conditions under which film could come to be regarded as a legitimated art form.

At the same time, however, cartoonists were arriving late to the party, and the possibility existed that these doors had already closed. From this standpoint, cartoonists occupied an aesthetically marginal space in much the same way that certain social groups were – and are – marginalized politically. As Nancy Hartsock has noted, 'Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subject rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?'¹⁵ Similarly, Julia Swindells points to the way in which autobiography itself has served as a liberating space for oppressed peoples:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and

the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working-class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself.¹⁶

Swindell’s notion of the culturally displaced inserting themselves into culture might seem particularly appealing to comic book artists of the 1990s seeking to have their work valorized as serious or important. I do not intend to claim that cartoonists belong in the same category as those who are socially and politically marginalized based on race, class, or gender. However, in terms of artistic production and the processes of legitimation, and because their chosen *métier* has so long been regarded as a devalued subculture intended for children, the adoption of an autobiographical tone can be seen as empowering.

Autobiography, therefore, becomes a mode which foregrounds both realism (as opposed to the traditions of fantasy) and the sense of the author as an artist demanding legitimacy (in contrast to the view of the cartoonist as a cultural hack slaving away to turn out mass-mediated product). In the field of contemporary comic book production, autobiography holds a promise to elevate the legitimacy of both the medium and the artist. Far from propounding the death of the author, as de Man would have it, autobiography in comics holds the possibility of giving the author birth for the first time.

Arguably the most important forerunners of the recent surge in European cartooning come from the American underground comics movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Harvey Pekar is probably the most representative figure, although the importance of Robert Crumb and Justin Green as innovators should not be minimized. Pekar’s *American Splendor* series began in the 1970s and is often regarded as a major departure point for realist comics production, although Pekar is not particularly widely translated in Europe. The best-known – and best-regarded – autobiographical comic in Europe to have come out of the American underground comics movement was Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Part autobiography, part biography of his parents, Spiegelman’s work dealt with the personal legacy of the Holocaust, and in particular with his parents’ experiences of Auschwitz. Combining cartooning and the Holocaust allowed Spiegelman to develop a ‘personal voice’ within the comics idiom, and his book is widely regarded as the most important ‘serious’ comic book ever published, earning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. The success of trans-

lated editions of *Maus* in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s was suggestive of the possibilities afforded to both autobiographical and non-conventional comic books. What the American underground demonstrated to European cartoonists was the possibility of creating comics that were primarily addressed to questions of personal subjectivity. The American underground movement was at once both a liberatory, personalizing visual aesthetic as well as a working model of authorial independence that favoured personal expression above all else. The insertion of the self into the aesthetic and business practices of the underground movement suggested new possibilities for the promotion of the field of comics as an art movement, possibilities that played out in Europe in a different manner.

In the 1970s a number of cartoonists – such as Marcel Gotlib and Moebius – had begun to place their self-images into their work, often in an ironic fashion. Gotlib, for instance, frequently portrayed himself in *Rubrique-à-brac* (Dargaud, 1970) as a megalomaniacal, beret-wearing ‘artiste’ character. Other than such satirical efforts, however, straightforward autobiographical comics were rare in the 1980s. Readers could speculate about the relationship between the life histories of artists like Baru and Yves Chaland and the protagonists of seemingly autobiographical fiction such as *Quéquette blues* (Dargaud, 1984) and *Le Jeune Albert* (Humanoïdes Associés, 1985), but neither of these books explicitly signalled an ‘autobiographical pact.’ Their work pointed towards the viability of an autobiographical approach within the traditional full-colour album format, but it did not mark the type of fundamental shift in perspective that is represented by the current generation. The precursor of that transition was Edmond Baudoin.

Baudoin helped to launch the field of autobiographical comics with his work in the 1980s for Futuropolis. *Passe le temps* (1982) and *Couma Aco* (1991) were central to the reputation of Futuropolis for publishing serious-minded, non-genre, and artist-driven works. In terms of delving into real situations and people rather than fantasies and adventure, Baudoin signified a growing sense of maturity in French cartooning, both in terms of audience expectations and personal aesthetics. With the death of Futuropolis as a publishing house in 1994, Baudoin moved much of his artistic output to L’Association, where he continued to produce autobiographical works like *Éloge de la poussière* (1995) and *Terrains vagues* (1996). His autobiographical output largely frames the possibilities inherent in the genre for a number of European cartoonists. It is important that Baudoin is not merely chronicling the passage of his life. His works are framed within poetic narratives complemented by a

very loose rendering style. As such, Baudoin primarily offers meditations on his life and his personal relationships, often with women, rather than straightforward accounts of his activities and reminiscences. His books contain roughly equal parts eroticism and philosophy.

In 2002 Baudoin began a new project that is typical of his interests in autobiography. *Le Chemin de Saint-Jean* is an oversized (27 × 37cm) black-and-white book that tells of Baudoin's connection to a mountain near his childhood home in Nice. The book is structured as a series of sketches of the mountain drawn at various points in Baudoin's life. There is no narrative as such, simply a series of notes regarding the feelings and memories that the metaphorical road of the title evokes in the artist. Further, the book – like so much of Baudoin's autobiographical work – is not fixed. Because Baudoin anticipates returning to this material throughout the rest of his career, the book is described as being in 'permanent elaboration.'¹⁷ The first edition of the book was given a relatively small print run of two thousand copies. Each subsequent reprinting of the book will contain new material as Baudoin develops it, allowing the text to mutate over time in much the same way that memories themselves develop and recede. Indeed, the second edition of the book (2004) was expanded in page count, but reduced to the more traditional size of the French album in L'Association's Collection Éperluette. Baudoin's poetic approach to the representation of his own memories and relationships marked a decidedly different approach to autobiographical cartooning than could be found in the work of previous European cartoonists, throwing open the door to contemporary autobiographical comics in Europe.

While Baudoin represents the most important precursor of European autobiographical comics, Marjane Satrapi better represents the critical and financial importance of autobiographical comics as a movement in Europe. Satrapi, termed the 'Persian comics star' by the French daily *Libération*,¹⁸ is among the most commercially successful of the new generation of European small-press cartoonists. Her four-volume autobiographical comic book, *Persepolis*, has been translated into numerous European languages, and an English-language edition was published by Pantheon – the publishers of *Maus* – in two volumes (2003, 2004). The French editions of her book, published by L'Association, have sold more than 100,000 copies.¹⁹ Moreover, the third volume of the series was pre-published in the pages of *Libération* in the summer of 2002, giving the work the same kind of national media exposure that a famous novelist or essayist might expect.

Persepolis is the strictly chronological story of Satrapi's life from childhood to young adulthood. Born in Tehran to middle-class parents, Satrapi evokes the hardships that her family suffered under the Islamic revolution that swept through Iran when she was ten years old. The series recalls her efforts to circumvent the strict religious teachings in Iran, the devastation wrought by the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, her schooling in Vienna, and her return to art school and a brief marriage in Iran. Satrapi's books, which are presented with a spare, stripped-down visual aesthetic, define for many the contemporary autobiographical comics movement. The wide exposure of her work, and its warm reception beyond the confines of the traditional comics reading public, has served to reinforce the association between serious subjects in contemporary comics and autobiography. Indeed, by dealing with her youth in an autobiographical manner rather than through fictionalization, Satrapi's work draws upon common assumptions about autobiography and truthfulness for much of its power.

While Satrapi has achieved the greatest commercial success in the autobiographical genre, her work is by no means normative. The visual aspects of autobiographical approaches within contemporary European comics are remarkably heterogeneous and plural despite evidence of considerable overlap within the thematics of the movement. Moreover, because the narrative content of so many autobiographical comics is roughly analogous, it is primarily through the processes of rendering and visualization that these works differ from each other. In 1996, for example, Thierry Groensteen identified a number of traits common to the narrative component of autobiographical comics. The two most prevalent of these were recollections of childhood and a recounting of intimate or sexual encounters.²⁰ These categories clearly encompass the work of Baudoin and Satrapi but also incorporate a large number of practitioners working in different contexts. Jean-Christophe Menu, whose own *Livret de phamille* (L'Association, 1995) is a central early text in the autobiographical comics movement, foregrounds his familial relationships – particularly to his wife and children – in his work. Swedish cartoonist Åsa Grennvall details her relationship with an extremely demanding and insensitive mother in *Det känns som hundra år* (Optimal Press, 1999), as well as her relationship with an emotionally and physically abusive boyfriend in *Sjunde våningen* (Optimal Press, 2002). Maaïke Hartjes portrays her quotidian life and her personal fears in *Maaïkes Grot Dagboekje* (Oog & Blik, 2002). The 381-page Finnish anthology *Sarjakuvapäivät* (Suuri Kurpitsa, 2001) features twelve artists – including

Kati Rapia, Katja Tukianinen, and Johanna Rojola – recording their diaries for a month apiece in comics form. Each of their pieces foregrounds the intimate in a very direct and highly personal manner. Frederik Peeters's 2001 book *Pilules bleues* (Atrabile) addresses his romantic involvement with an HIV-positive woman and her young HIV-positive son. While each of these artists utilizes a different visual approach – Menu's loose cartooning, Hartjes's minimalist quasi-stick figures, Peeters's highly symbolic figures within a traditional page design – the intent behind their projects bears a considerable degree of overlap. Indeed, the social and narrative concerns of contemporary European autobiographical cartooning have been codified, even across national borders.

The most notable of all autobiographical comics publishers is France's Ego Comme X. Begun as an anthology publisher in 1994, Ego Comme X was started by students from the Atelier Bande Dessinée at the École Régionale des Beaux-Arts d'Angoulême. Their stated desire was to highlight the importance of 'the real' in contradistinction to the dominant comics aesthetic of escapist fantasy. While various other publishers had pushed autobiography to the forefront of the new comics scene in the 1990s – particularly L'Association and Cornélius – Ego Comme X was the first to make autobiographical comics something of an imperative. Writing in the first issue, Thierry Groensteen argued: 'Still, at one time, the full-colour adventures of irreproachable heroes were rolled out on glazed paper. They neglected reality, preferring to turn to any elsewhere, provided that it was synonymous with escape, and the promise of entertainment. But all that is finished! The comic book has changed.'²¹ The artists published by Ego Comme X – Aristophane, Xavier Mussat, Fabrice Neaud, Frédéric Poincelet, Frédéric Boilet, Matthieu Blanchin, Pauline Martin, among numerous others – share a common concern with detailing their intimate personal relationships, and often recollections of their childhoods, in the comics form.

Loïc Nehou and Poincelet take this tendency to the extreme in *Essai de sentimentalisme* (Ego Comme X, 2001) in which Poincelet illustrates explicit stories of Nehou's sex life. The doubled disclosure that this effort entails – Nehou's openness to Poincelet, the artist's frankness with the reader – is unusual in the field and pushes the portrayal of the intimate to its logical extreme. Poincelet's visual approach is perhaps the least conventional in the field of autobiographical comics. Coming from a fine arts and painting background, Poincelet uses no traditional panels, and his pages are mostly composed of white space. Indeed, his work

is an obvious bridge between the autobiographical comics movement and the avant-garde tendencies of Frémok (he published a book, *Livre de prières*, with Amok in 1998).

If Poincelet's work is proof that, as Groensteen suggested, the comics had changed as a result of these formal and, more accurately, thematic shifts, it is also evidence of an increasing concretization of opposition to the heteronomous comics market. Autobiography, as a largely untapped genre offering the opportunity to speak directly for one's self as an author, represented to the new generation of creators a credible alternative to the fantasies that comprised the majority of European comics production. The diverse approaches that autobiography accorded the comics form served as a reinforcement of the idea, as another editorial in *Ego Comme X* #1 indicated, that 'a comics that reflects, wonders about its means, realized by authors conscious of being able to express themselves differently with a great deal of accuracy, becomes a language of its own.'²² At the same time, however, autobiography risked calcifying into a genre that was as formalized and structured as those that it sought to reject, becoming the small-press genre par excellence. The tension between the heteronomous regimes of fantasy comics publishing in Europe and the more autonomous sector of artist-driven autobiography is highlighted in a number of books published by Ego Comme X and L'Association. Specifically, the work of David B., Dupuy and Berberian, and Fabrice Neaud offers concrete assessments, within an autobiographical form, of the shaping of an independent or alternative European comics culture rooted in personal psychodynamics.

In outlining the common tropes in autobiographical comics, Thierry Groensteen suggests that a distinctively French aspect of the movement is a focus on 'the chronicle of the professional life, the *mise-en-scène* of the author's trade in comics.'²³ In the case of David B.'s six-volume *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* (L'Association, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003) (figure 15), the author combines his childhood recollections, the history of his family, and his own growth as a cartoonist in order to place his life story in dialogue with his other comics work, genre-based fantasy comics. In an interview, David B. defined his particular approach to autobiography, which extends far beyond recollections of his own life:

Often, people in autobiographical comics tell their life. Period ... Me, I try to tell another thing, I tell what has happened to my family, I also tell memories of my grandparents, of the things which I heard told, a kind of family mythology, memories of grandparents, great-grandparents. For ex-



15 David B. discusses his work with his father. From *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* volume 4.

ample, the war of 14 in the case of my grandfather, or the colonization of Indo-China in the case of my great-grandfather, things like that. And then, I try to tell, parallel to that, the construction of my imagination and the influence that all that I lived could have on this imagination.²⁴

Indeed, the strong family element in David B.'s autobiographical comics is suggested when he says, 'of course, it is not a work that I undertook all alone, egotistically. It is a work that I make for my sister as well, for my parents and my brother.'²⁵ The sense of producing comics not only for one's self, but for an entire family, is highlighted by the content of the books themselves.

L'Ascension du Haut Mal tells the story of the Beauchard family's attempts to deal with the severe epilepsy of their eldest son, Jean-Christophe. Failed by medical science, the family turns to a variety of alternative options in France during the 1970s, including macrobiotics, acupuncture, spiritualism, magnetism, and alchemy. Jean-Christophe's illness structures the entire social life of the family, forcing them to move and entirely redesign their lives in an effort to find a cure. David B. details this as a series of traumas that the family is forced to confront, crises that ultimately shape and structure his own approach to the world in which he lives. As the child of art teachers, David deals with the difficulties that his family faces by retreating into comic books and his own imagination. He finds refuge in his art, where he is most fond of drawing large-scale battle scenes featuring the likes of Genghis Khan, images that recall a traditional stereotype of juvenile interest in escapist adventure comics. The artist's visual aesthetic, which is dominated by highly symbolic and non-representational images, is shown to be derived from the twinning of his interest in fantasy and the occult (brought on by his parents' search for a spiritualist answer to the problems of Jean-Christophe) and the social world in which he was immersed as a boy. In the second volume, for example, David learns that he can turn the adult disapproval of his violent drawings of battle scenes by simply changing the images to those of samurai, which, as products of a Japanese iconography, are endorsed by his macrobiotic community.²⁶ Indeed, David B. explicitly relates his brother's epilepsy with his desire to create violent battle imagery in the first volume of the series: 'I'm not any one person. I'm a group, an army. I have enough rage in me for one hundred thousand warriors. I relate my brother's seizures to this rage.'²⁷ *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*, therefore, can be largely read as the story of a young man who learns to cope with a severe and chronic familial crisis through the

cultivation of his own artistic and creative impulses, and the book even retains examples of the comics that he created as a young boy.

A significant subtext in this book series is David's increasing professionalization as an artist, a point that is particularly highlighted in the final volume, when he moves to Paris to attend school. David chooses to enroll in an art school where the cartoonist Georges Pichard is an instructor. Pichard, best known for his erotic adult comics material from magazines like *Charlie Mensuel*, takes an interest in David's career as a cartoonist and becomes his mentor. David B.'s attempts to break into the mainstream of the European comics market in the 1980s met with limited success – he published one album with Glénat and a number of short works in magazines such as (*À Suivre*), *Circus*, and *Okapi*. It wasn't until the creation of L'Association in 1990 that he found his real calling as an artist. He describes the establishment of L'Association, saying, 'That was an opening for me. There, I really had the impression of filling a vacuum.'²⁸ At the same time, however, he deals with the formation of this influential group in a single panel of the 300+ page autobiography, noting only that the creation of the organization saved him from the despair that had been brought on by his inability with his partner to have a child.²⁹

Given the centrality of L'Association to the small-press comics movement, particularly by 2003 when the sixth volume was published, and of the therapeutic power of art within the books, it is somewhat surprising to find these events dealt with so casually. Indeed, it is clear that while David B. is happy to discuss his professionalization as a background to the larger question of his own psychological development as a person, he does not privilege his work for L'Association beyond the work that he has subsequently undertaken for larger publishing firms like Dargaud and Dupuis. He notes that '[Jean-Christophe] Menu very often says: We do not make the same things as these people there. On the contrary. I think we do exactly the same thing. But we do not do it in the same manner.'³⁰

For David B., who notes that he is a voracious reader of all sorts of comics, the ideology of independence is not central to the work of cultural production, nor is it integral to the story of how he became the person he is. *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* is not a break from genre work for the large publishers but an extension of that work that enables him to frame it within a distinctly personal context. Yet, crucially, such a commentary on the relations of readers to genre comics can only be published outside of the system of genre comics itself. The ideology and social organization of alternative comics in contemporary Europe situ-

ates autobiography outside of the dominant sphere of the market, placing David B. in a liminal state. He can only work for the large publishing houses once he has worked out his relationship to them at an independent press.

This idea is one that is explicitly endorsed by David B. in a number of interviews. He has said, for example, regarding his fiction, '*L'Ascension du Haut Mal* gives keys to the reader that are not in the other books.'³¹ It is clear in reading the artist's autobiographical comics that there exists a deep interconnection between his interests as a child, his personal aesthetic as an adult, and the fantasy work that he produces for the large publishing houses. He explained in an interview:

For me the autobiography is not an end in itself. Now, I want to tell important things, which, in my opinion, can be of interest to the readers. Because what happened to us does not happen every day and because it is at the same time a testimony over time, of people etc. More, it is a slightly expanded autobiography since I speak about my grandparents, of my great grandparents, people that I don't know. I do not speak solely about me; I try speaking about the family circle. It's true that I intend afterward to write fiction.³²

He directly ties *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* into one of his first books, *Le Cheval blême* (L'Association, 1992), insofar as material is virtually reiterated from one to the other. *Le Cheval blême* is a collection of comics based upon the artist's dreams. Similar dreams appear sporadically throughout *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*, and with more particular frequency in the final volume, depicting events around the time that *Le Cheval blême* was initially published. From this standpoint, the autobiographical work extends retroactively to incorporate a small-press publication that preceded it, placing both in the same psychological orbit.

Other books are also hinted at throughout the autobiographical text. The author's penchant for drawing samurais in battle as a young man is a clear link to *Le Tengû Carré* (Dargaud, 1997), a book that recounts traditional Japanese legends. Indeed, the link between the author's dreams, fantasies, and personal psychic symbology is rendered explicit throughout the text. 'Rêver, raconter,' he tells himself in the final volume.³³ By the end of the series, David B. has included literally dozens of references to his work in other books. Jean-Christophe, for example, is described in the final volume as living in a 'universe that has become hostile,'³⁴ with an image of menacing physical effects ranging from

books to alarm clocks. This image recalls the central narrative of *La Révolte d'Hop-Frog* (Dargaud, 1997), a western that David B. wrote for artist Christophe Blain in which a gang of man-made objects led by a teapot attacks the inhabitants of a small town. Whether this is a retroactive acknowledgment of that earlier genre work or whether the mental image inspired by the artist's brother was the spur for the Dargaud album, is unclear. What is evident, however, is the fact that David B. has used *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* as a sort of explanatory text that provides insight into the mind that has created some of the most offbeat genre comics in recent publishing history. From this standpoint the distinction between autobiographical and fictional work in contemporary European comics production is revealed as more fluid than defenders of the genre might otherwise claim. It is clear, in fact, that autobiography is simply one strand of a complex web of possibilities that constitute the contemporary field of European comics production, albeit a strand for which particular ideological claims have been regularly made.

While David B.'s autobiographical work provides a sort of roundabout insight into his more conventional genre work, a much more explicit relationship is enacted in *Journal d'un album* by Philippe Dupuy and Charles Berberian. Dupuy and Berberian are a Paris cartooning and illustration duo who have been working together since the 1980s. Together they have created two successful book series – *Henriette*, about a young girl, and *M. Jean*, about a middle-aged author in Paris. Their relationship is unique in the world of comics insofar as they co-author their scripts and each contributes to the drawing process, often with one pencilling the figures and the other inking – although other combinations also arise. While each artist has done some small amount of work alone or with other collaborators, the vast majority of their creative output over the course of two decades has been done in tandem. Their autobiographical book is at once a break from that tendency and a reinforcement of it.

Journal d'un album chronicles the making of the third *M. Jean* book, *Monsieur Jean, les femmes et les enfants d'abord* (Humanoïdes Associés, 1994). It is a 115-page black-and-white comic book about the creation of a 46-page full-colour hardcover album. Moreover, it is the only instance in which each of the artists has published work that is solely his own under the Dupuy and Berberian banner; Dupuy does not directly contribute to Berberian's work, and vice versa. As such, the book represents an effort to work singly, but because it is an autobiography in which two people contribute chapters, it is also another instance of working jointly.

In a letter to *9e Art* magazine, Berberian outlined something of the pair's approach to the project and the difference between this project and their more traditional work:

I have a subject to treat. If I can develop it by using a character other than me, I do it. I transpose, for example, in *M. Jean*. I can say 'we,' because in this case, Dupuy and me, use *M. Jean* like a screen.

But in the case of *Journal d'un album*, the subject (inter alia) was my rapport with comics. There, I needed to write in the first person. I then treated myself like a character. I caricatured myself, and from there, it was no problem to stroll through panels. In fact, I created a character that incarnated a certain idea of me.³⁵

Key to the relationship between autobiographical practice and commercial album production in the case of Dupuy and Berberian, therefore, is the distinction between transposing life experiences into a fictional setting and transposing them within the autobiographical pact.

In many ways, *Journal d'un album* is a conventional autobiographical novel. Many of Dupuy's chapters, for example, delve into the territory of intimate confession. As I have already noted, in one chapter he recounts the death of his mother. Elsewhere, he addresses the fears that are brought about by his father's failing health. More centrally, he discusses in great depth his troubled relationship with his wife Tessa. Dupuy's depiction of his relationship is in stark contrast to the way he depicts the marriage of Berberian. While he shows Charles and his wife Anne as perpetually happily in love, his own marriage is seen to be falling apart. He frequently discusses the situation with friends and colleagues, and his marriage enters into a crisis phase while they are producing the *M. Jean* book, although it is resolved by the time they have completed it.

A lengthy sequence midway through the book makes the connection between Dupuy's despair and the darkness consuming the life of the fictional Jean explicit. Dupuy recreates an image of a despondent Jean, only to transform the image into a self-caricature in the next panel. From that point onward Dupuy moves through the fictive universe of *M. Jean* as his real life and fiction blur together in an expressionistic nightmare (figure 16). Later in the book, Tessa reads the pages that her husband has drawn about the near-dissolution of their marriage, agreeing to have this dark period in their relationship placed before the public for consumption. It is one of several moments in the book where the process of creating an autobiographical comic is explicitly addressed



16 Philippe Dupuy grieves. From *Journal d'un album*.

in a self-referential manner. This type of self-referentiality is one of the key markers that distinguishes the narrational mode and invokes the autobiographical pact. Tessa's commentary on the pages serves in a way to notarize the interpretation of events, to confirm that they have happened and that it is not simply a melodramatic invention, as Dupuy fears.

While the familial relationships are important to *Journal d'un album*, central to the book's narrative is the relationship of the authors to the field of comics: as consumers, as producers, as colleagues, and as authors. Berberian introduces this subject in the book's first chapter, travelling in a taxi with a driver who does not recognize cartooning as a valid profession. In the second chapter, he recounts a story about a lecture he gave at a vacation village in Quercy, where none of the attendees was in any way familiar with his work. In both instances, the profession of cartoonist is presented as something laughable and beneath contempt (interestingly, a more successful lecture following the first is dismissed in just two panels). Indeed, the cover of the album depicts the authors wearing eleven-armed alien costumes, saying, 'We are artists, we make comic books'³⁶ in an entirely unconvincing manner. Berberian depicts his relationship with comics as an entirely unhealthy one that stems from his childhood in Baghdad. Alone in Paris while his wife and daughter are out of town, he spends his time in bookstores buying books that he fondly recalls from his childhood. He tells Anne that he must keep these volumes because they are his only link to a youth spent in Baghdad, a city that has now been mostly destroyed. At the same time, however, he is forced to acknowledge to his younger self that he did not collect *Simpsons* figures as a child but that he does now. Further, he refuses to let his young daughter play with them. Later in the book he outlines in great detail his fixation on the American superhero character Batman.

Throughout *Journal d'un album* Berberian triangulates his life's work with his childhood interests (figure 17), seeing it as both an abject embarrassment and also a source of genuine joy, as when a new book is released and he races to the publisher to see the first copies. Where Dupuy is forthright about the influence of his personal and marital problems on his life and work (outlining a number of personal 'demons' at one point in the book), Berberian addresses the ongoing importance of his childhood obsessions on his life as an adult. If, as Groensteen suggests, the dominant tropes of autobiographical comics are childhood experience and intimate interpersonal relationships, it seems that the duo has both covered symbiotically.



17 A young Charles Berberian lectures his older self. From *Journal d'un album*.

At the same time, however, the book is also very much about the personal and creative relationship that exists between these two artists. In the book's second chapter, Berberian attempts to explain to an uncomprehending public the unique way in which the two collaborate on projects, but is largely unsuccessful. Later chapters illustrate the working relationship more clearly. For example, Dupuy recounts the chapter that most explicitly details the creation of the *M. Jean* book, particularly through an anecdote regarding *M. Jean's* hair. In one chapter of the *M. Jean* album, the character fantasizes about being a medieval king whose castle is assaulted by beautiful women hurling babies at the ramparts. Dupuy phones his partner to complain that Berberian has pencilled *M. Jean* without the medieval haircut that Dupuy had given him in the roughs. They dispute the character's hairstyle and fax each other images. Dupuy then spends a good deal of time inquiring among his colleagues as to which version they find more appropriate, before ultimately conceding the issue to Berberian. From Dupuy's perspective, therefore, the completion of this story requires the sublimation of his own professional instincts.

The accommodations that an artist makes in order to realize a work are also the subject of the final chapter, which details many of the obstacles that the pair had to overcome to get the finished book published. These include problems with the colourist, the rumoured bankruptcy of their publisher, the creation of a *M. Jean* agenda book without their knowledge or consent, and a fire at the offices of Humanoïdes Associés. The drama of each of these crises, which are presented as severe, is mitigated somewhat by the reader's knowledge that the third book in the series had, in fact, been published before the release of *Journal d'un album*. The book presents not an image of the pitfalls of commercial publishing, therefore, so much as an extended essay on the relationship between art and commerce. The challenges posed by the obstacles on the road to publishing the third *M. Jean* volume are characterized through a board game metaphor, with the authors running wildly about while dice crash around them. These, the reader is led to believe, are the common travails of working within a highly commercial publishing industry. Yet the rest of the book prods the edges of the commercial-independent split within the field of contemporary comic book production.

Throughout *Journal d'un album*, the relationship of Dupuy and Berberian to the independent comics scene in Paris is an issue. Dupuy shares an atelier with the artist Blutch and frequently depicts himself

interacting with members of the so-called *nouvelle bande dessinée* movement. In a seven-panel parenthesis, Dupuy presents the tension between Humanoïdes Associés and L'Association that he perceived at that time. The decision to undertake an autobiographical comic was influenced by the work of many of L'Association's artists, who were engaged in autobiography. Further, Dupuy and Berberian share a common interest in the author-centric ideology of L'Association, and the duo was responsible for one of the company's first major books, *Les Héros ne meurent jamais* (1991). Fully intending to publish *Journal* with L'Association, the pair had informed Humanoïdes Associés, their primary publisher at that time, of their autobiographical comic as a courtesy, not anticipating that the large publishing house would be interested in a project of this type. However, Humanoïdes Associés insisted on publishing the book, arguing:

I understand perfectly your passion for l'Association, we share in it! But Humanoïdes Associés also have the vocation of publishing atypical books (as long as we consider them interesting). Also think of what we can bring: distribution, impact when grouped with the M. Jean album.

And in the end, it is necessary to be logical: we cannot claim to have an author-driven policy and not want to put out this journal.³⁷

Dupuy then spends three panels in a nightmare, worrying about the reaction of his more militant, independent colleagues who would call the duo opportunists, traitors, and 'arrivistes.' Ultimately, however, L'Association president Jean-Christophe Menu greets the news with quiet understanding, noting that he would do the same thing in the same situation.

Nonetheless, L'Association publishes the final book in the end, for reasons that the book never attempts to make clear. The final page finds Dupuy and Berberian discussing the decision and agreeing that it is best if Humanoïdes Associés were to publish the book, but the reader is fully aware that this is a product decidedly of the small press. The refusal of an explanation in the text naturalizes the distinction between the large publishing houses and the independents. Moreover, it shifts the moral weight of the contemporary publishing industry behind the independent presses, whose commitment to an author-driven policy is realized in the action of publishing the book, while the rhetoric of the Humanoïdes Associés executive is left, with no fuller elaboration, at the level of empty discourse. As such, a book like *Journal d'un album* draws upon the

conventions of the autobiographical comic book extant at that time and expands upon them in order to present an argument that the authors should be regarded as legitimate artists, and that legitimate artists are those whose work is most akin to the current independent aesthetics and philosophy.

A similar argument is advanced in the work of Fabrice Neaud, particularly in his ongoing autobiographical series *Journal*. Neaud began publishing autobiographical comics in 1994, in the first issue of *Ego Comme X*. His work since that time has constituted the most ambitious autobiographical comics project yet published. Every second year since 1996, Neaud has released one volume of his autobiography. Ranging in length from 71 to 374 pages, these volumes have retraced the author's life from February 1992 to July 1996. The books place quotidian aspects of Neaud's life within a much larger philosophical framework that addresses issues of representation, self-identity, and creative work. Neaud's books are structured around several poles, the most notable of which is his position as a struggling artist and gay man living in small-town France. Two of the books – volumes one and three – place Neaud's homosexuality at centre stage, as each book focuses on the author's love for someone who does not reciprocate his feelings. Volumes two and four place much greater emphasis on Neaud's status as a cartoonist, his struggles at art school and on the professional market, and his colleagues in the visual arts.

Since publishing the first volume of his autobiography in 1996, Neaud has become, essentially, a professional autobiographer. While he has published a small number of non-autobiographical comics works – mostly essays – the act of telling his life story has become Neaud's primary career. Unlike David B. or Dupuy and Berberian, whose autobiographies help to shed light on a larger corpus of work, Fabrice Neaud's work consists almost exclusively of comics that are, at least in part, about his involvement in the field of comics. As such, Neaud's work offers a much more forcefully and dramatically enunciated argument about the way autobiography has the potential to consecrate the artist working within the field of comic book production.

I have already pointed to the way Neaud reveals his disappointment that the members of L'Association critique the autobiographical work of Philippe Dupuy. Neaud's comments on what he sees as an inappropriate critique of form are ironic given the fact that he clearly works harder on formal composition than most cartoonists. He argues that his autobiography is a specific type, a diary, and this is signalled by the work's title. Swindell's assertion that autobiography is a form in which the culturally

displaced forge a right to speak for themselves has a great deal in common with this notion of the diary, which has often been characterized as existing outside the mainstream of heroic and masculine autobiography. Linda Anderson argues ‘the unchronological and unprogressive form of the diary could be viewed, therefore, as a reflection of women’s different experience, or as a deliberate strategy, an escape into a potential or protean form of subjectivity.’³⁸ In emphasizing the importance of subjectivity, Anderson’s description highlights a central aspect of Neaud’s work, which is the reconstruction of subjective personal experiences and emotional states of being. At the same time, however, Anderson’s emphasis on unprogressive and unchronological work is a challenge to Neaud’s sense of his project as diaristic. By unchronological, Anderson means specifically those works intended for private, rather than public, consumption – works that address minor shifts in routine, for example.

Neaud’s published diary evokes a more masculinist trajectory, seeking to elevate the diary within the traditions of autobiographical writing by minimizing quotidian and repetitive aspects of his life while emphasizing the least typical moments. Neaud speaks directly to this point in the fourth volume when he notes that he has dedicated six pages of his journal to a man he knew for less than an hour:

The proportion of pages allotted to men in this journal is not representative of the presence of the latter in my life ... But it is completely of the place that they occupy for me. If I were more just, more objective, more mathematical, I should rather draw a vacuum. To try to represent their absence.³⁹

Indeed, Neaud has repeatedly stressed that the chronology of events is strictly respected in his work, though clearly this chronology is filtered through the author’s editorial process. Not all events are represented even in passing, and some events are given much greater weight than are others. The principle that guides the book’s focus is, as Neaud indicates above, those experiences that continue to haunt his thinking and shape his sense of self-identity. In this way, Neaud’s work is much more clearly a chronology of his psychosocial subjectivity than a strict recording of the events in his life.

This tension between objective and subjective recording of life experiences is, of course, at the very heart of autobiography. Neaud’s work, which is produced retrospectively at a distance of several years, tends to highlight the subjective representation of sentiment within a highly realist framework. This formal structuring is a consequence of time.

Neaud's attempt to produce a more direct comics journal, created contemporaneously with events, was published as 'Première Tentative de journal direct' in *Ego Comme X* #5. Neaud abandoned these efforts, sensing that this work was no more 'direct' than the comics that he produced at a greater distance in time: 'It is never more difficult, on the contrary, than to remove the distance, especially with a drawing like mine. One would need a minimal writing to manage to hold a journal that would claim the abolition of this distance, which would remain an illusion. There is always transposition.'⁴⁰

Neaud's rejection of direct autobiography stems from his acknowledgment that the artist is always in the process of selecting and editing when creating. There is, therefore, no way to create autobiography in an unmediated manner. This forces the author to prioritize subjective, personal experiences. Yet, at the same time, Neaud is interested in distinguishing his work from fiction, a form with no necessary claims to external ideas of realism. To this end, Neaud's process of transposition stems from the reworking of written and drawn diaristic notes that he makes in the present, as well as extensive use of photo reference. In some cases, Neaud has been able to convince his friends to pose for him as he draws images of their past selves.⁴¹ Thus, Neaud presents his work as distinct from fiction insofar as it is positioned as a form of subjectivity rooted in a sense of 'reality.' Realism thus becomes the central axis around which Neaud's comics revolve.

The techniques of photo reference, note-taking, and life drawing all highlight Neaud's elaboration of a realist aesthetic within the confines of the representation of highly subjective experiences. Neaud's emphasis on realism as a legitimating tendency for comics production may initially seem odd, given the general disdain with which other forms of strict realism are regarded in the arts. Writing on realist painting, for example, John L. Ward notes

There is a widely held belief that realism, because it is normative, even conventional, is inherently antithetical to fundamental modernist principles concerning the primacy of personal experience, the necessity to overturn conventions and traditional ways of seeing and thinking, and the importance of using the medium to redefine its own nature and possibilities.⁴²

Neaud's reliance on realism – which has become increasingly problematized in each volume since the first – exists, as Sébastien Soleille

notes, in opposition to certain tendencies found in the autobiographical work of Dupuy and Berberian, or Lewis Trondheim, whose stylized renderings resemble the fiction produced by those artists. Neaud evokes an aesthetic that is rarely used in comics in order to mark his distance from the traditions of the form. At the same time, however, his emphasis on subjective and emotional responses to events moves him away from realism.

In this manner, when he depicts his body increasingly covered by enormous spiders – as he does in *Journal (I)* – the departure from realism is used to heighten the symbolic effect of the image. Similarly, when he depicts his first extended conversation with Dominique – in *Journal (III)* – as an eighteen-page mute sequence filled with non-diegetic backgrounds, the sequence shifts the definition of realism away from objective representation and places it into subjective territory. This episode, which Neaud has described as a conscious effort to produce a sequence that is avant-garde or ‘oubapienne,’⁴³ is perhaps the instance that most forcefully highlights the twinned oppositions that structure the *Journal* series: a realist aesthetic/a symbolic aesthetic; objective social reality/subjective responses to that reality. It is in the working through of these oppositions that he is able to escape the trap suggested by Ward and use realism to redefine the comics medium in reference to its own possibilities through a particularly visual strategy of creation. Indeed, the ability of Neaud to utilize realist imagery, extended narrative sequences, and text points to the significant ways that realist comics differ from realist painting.

Writing about self-portraiture in painting, Philippe Lejeune has suggested that because there is no internal sign that allows a viewer to distinguish a self-portrait from a portrait, there may be no such thing as a first person in painting.⁴⁴ The same cannot be said for comics, however. The ability to move between representational and subjective modes – as Neaud, and all of the cartoonists considered here, do – distinguishes the comics form from the traditions of portrait painting and situates the play of reality and subjectivity as central to the autobiographical project.

A short sequence in *Journal (4)* serves as an attempt to place Fabrice Neaud, and his colleagues in *Ego Comme X*, within the larger field of small-press cartooning in Europe. In this section, which details a trip to Brussels to participate in the 1995 Autarcic Comix festival, with more pages dedicated to the drive from Angoulême to Brussels than to the actual festival itself, Neaud highlights the casual manner in which he positions his work within a larger context. He indicates that he was not

unhappy to meet with a number of artists whom he highly regards, specifically noting Jean-Christophe Menu, Mattt Konture, and Yvan Alagbé. At the same time, however, he deals with the festival itself only fleetingly, preferring to dwell on other issues. It could be argued, therefore, that his autobiography – while it is concretely focused on the question of producing an autobiography – is more concerned with processes of reception and communication than it is with processes of production.

While cartoonists like David B. and Dupuy and Berberian bring up the question of how others read their autobiographical comics, Neaud pushes this tendency further, tying it to his particular definition of realism. At the same time, however, his emphasis on the reception of his work serves to highlight his tendency to undercut strict realism to emphasize the subjective experience of his personal reactions. In his *Journal* Neaud has given examples of reception and miscommunication that can be divided into two general categories: the reaction of his intimate friends to his work and the reaction of complete strangers.

To date, the reaction of intimates has been the most central of these relationships in the *Journal* series. Specifically, the third volume of the series, with its primary focus on Neaud's relationship with Dominique, addresses this issue most concretely. He depicts Dominique's reaction to his work on a number of occasions in this volume, and the relationship between the two men is often framed in relation to their different dispositions towards art and autobiography. One of the artist's first encounters with Dominique takes place at the 1994 Salon International de la Bande Dessinée in Angoulême, at which an exhibition of work from *Ego Comme X* #1 is presented. As the centrepiece of the exhibition, the artists moved Neaud's bed into the space in order to symbolize the dismantling of the distinction between the public and private realms, in much the same way that their comics do. Pushing this even further, a near naked Neaud occupies his bed on the Saturday of the festival, laying in a fetal position that recalls one of his story's panels.

As recounted in *Journal (III)*, he positions his relationship to the festival – and to the mainstream of French comics production – in terms of avant-gardist artistic practice as he is engaged in both non-traditional comics production and a minor form of performance art. He writes that occupying the bed for the day allowed him time to meditate on the artistic project undertaken by *Ego Comme X*, and, as he later details in the book, the exhibition allowed him to gain insight into the views of the man with whom he was in love at the time. However, Dominique's

interest in Neaud is mitigated by three important factors, which intersect at various points in the book. First, Dominique is not gay. Second, Dominique, as an art student, prefers painting to comics and sees almost no value in Neaud's chosen medium. Third, Dominique does not value autobiography. He dismisses the work of Anne Frank, for example, as poorly written, arguing 'the greatest suffering does not excuse literary mediocrity, if one does not have a talent. Of course, a comic book autobiography ...'⁴⁵ The intersection of these factors, of Dominique's disdain for Fabrice and for the work that he creates, is central to the events of *Journal (III)*. Further, the denunciation of this work by Dominique serves as a negative basis against which the artist justifies his aesthetic.

Neaud seeks to legitimize autobiographical comics against the disapprobation of Dominique in a number of ways in *Journal (III)*, some successful, some not. He recounts, for example, his creation of a mini-comic entitled 'Le Doumé, vers un machisme cultivé' that he created to mock the object of his affections. Needless to say, this volume, when discovered by Dominique, does little to convince him of the merits of the comics form or to win his heart. Indeed, he is never able to convince Dominique of the value of his chosen mode of expression, instead having to retroactively demonstrate his abilities through his reconstruction of events in the *Journal*.

Two conversations in particular fully establish the painful futility of the relationship between Fabrice and Dominique. The first of these, recounted on pages 130 through 139, takes place in June 1994 as Fabrice presents six pages to Dominique recounting an erotic dream that he had concerning his friend. Throughout the scene Neaud shifts from strict realism to highly subjective imagery. As he hands Dominique the pages, for example, they take on the shape of a gun. He intercuts images of a mute Dominique reading the pages with images of his friend Cyril warning him not to show him the work. Finally, in a series of five successive panels over three pages, he depicts a still Dominique engulfed in an explosion that destroys his apartment, leaving the town in ruins and bringing about, as Cyril warns in voice-over, the end of the world. Sitting among the ruins of Fabrice's hopes and desires, Dominique can find nothing to say about the work. His full response is delayed until more than one hundred pages later in the book, when Fabrice again visits him in his apartment. This eighteen-page sequence is composed entirely of a monologue by Dominique – neither Neaud's image nor his words appear in any of the panels, and the entire sequence is drawn as if

from the artist's point of view. Throughout the sequence Dominique harangues Fabrice, rejecting his offers of love and, in the end, of friendship. When Dominique tells Fabrice that he has no right to use his image in his work or in his fantasies, Neaud continues to draw him but with a black bar across his eyes, like a television station making a half-hearted attempt to conceal the identity of an informer. As the conversation continues, Neaud allows Dominique's image to fade away entirely, becoming a series of empty panels with word balloons in them, before finally culminating in back-to-back full-page images, the first a portrait of Dominique commanding 'forget me,' the second a blank page with the same behest.

Neaud's use of highly subjective techniques in these pages – whether the metaphorical destruction of his fantasies or the recreation of a sense of blacking out in a conversation gone horribly awry – is the artist's ultimate response to Dominique's dismissal of autobiography. Indeed, Neaud ably depicts a great deal of emotional suffering without resorting to the sort of 'literary mediocrity' that Dominique diagnosed in the work of Anne Frank. In retrospect, it seems, he is able to communicate to Dominique through his work in a way that he was not able to do in person.

Journal (4) moves the issue of communication away from Neaud's circle of friends and colleagues and brings it more directly to a question of audience. The fourth volume of the series recounts the time immediately following the release of the first volume of the series. This volume was tremendously well received by the critics, winning the Alph'Art Coup de Coeur at Angoulême in 1997. He has indicated in interviews that winning that prize changed his life and his work to a degree.⁴⁶ For the first time, Neaud had to interact with people who knew him first and foremost by the way he presented himself in his books rather than reading his work after knowing him for some time.

In a fourteen-page sequence in *Journal (4)* detailing the 1996 Salon International de la Bande Dessinée in Angoulême, he recounts three anecdotes that present different reactions to his work, as well as his own reaction to these reactions. The first of these is between Fabrice and a woman he accuses of having 'squatted' his book – that is, she sat in the back of the Ego Comme X booth and read the whole thing without buying it. This galls Fabrice, but what upsets him even more is her feeling that she is entitled to criticize the book without bothering to purchase it. The two end up screaming at each other and trading insults before Fabrice storms away.

The second conversation is more satisfying for the artist. Fabrice talks to a young woman for whom he is doing a *dédicace*, or a personalized drawing in the book. Because Neaud's comics are drawn entirely from his daily life rather than his imagination, the drawings that he does in books are of the people who have asked for the *dédicace*. This tendency leads to an engaged conversation between the two about the nature of his work, and particularly about the morality of Neaud's interjection into the public sphere. Is it appropriate, the woman wonders, for Neaud to involve his friends and acquaintances in his comics against their will? He responds with the spirited defence of his interpretation of the nature of privacy that he had failed to deliver to Dominique.

The final conversation is a radio interview done in conjunction with the festival. Fabrice is uncomfortably interrogated by a radio announcer about his publishing house, his book, and his so-called homosexual agenda. In the end he engages in a spirited attack on the interviewer's interpretation of the first volume of his autobiographical comics, arguing that because the work is drawn directly from his life, the man essentially has no right to his clichéd reading of the work. Indeed, Fabrice insists that the man's interpretation of an early part of the series has the effect of reducing reality to a simple trick of amateur fiction, thereby serving to delegitimize the work as both a form of realism and a form of legitimate culture.

These three conversations – arguments, really – allow Neaud to frame his own artistic career in relation to the dominant traditions of the comic book in France. He depicts himself in relation to his art and to the demands of the commercial aspect of that art. Significantly, he casts the commercial element of the Angoulême festival as foreign and alienating, losing his temper with a woman who doesn't buy his book and with a radio host who is helping him promote his book to potential buyers. Neither approach – helping him commercially or hindering his sales – seems to please Neaud, and indeed the book presents the commercialized aspect of comics production as an opposition to the true nature of art, rather than simply critiquing the specific behaviour of these individuals. Similarly, his argument with the woman for whom he drew a *dédicace*, which never turns heated but is always engaged at the level of philosophical exchange, is presented as one of the high points in the narrative. Neaud's amicable conclusion demonstrates how he offers up the intellectual give and take as the preferred reading of his work – it's not about the conclusions, but about the process of argumentation and discovery. This conclusion, which insists upon the communicative rather

than the commercial aspect of comic book creation, is a straightforward affirmation of the autonomous principle of art in opposition to the heteronomous demands of the marketplace that he condemns.

From this standpoint, therefore, it is possible to regard the totality of Neaud's *Journal* project as an attempt to stake out a particularly legitimated space in the field of comics production that finds its origins in the intersection of reality and subjectivity within the specific sub-field of autobiographical work.

The sense that autobiographical comics represent an altogether new alternative to the traditions of the European comics market has been widely remarked upon. Indeed, the idea that autobiography and *la nouvelle bande dessinée* are virtual synonyms is hinted at in this anecdote from David B.: 'For example, [François] Boucq in a debate in which I was also participating said: "Yeah, L'Asso, they're the guys who tell us how they brush their teeth."⁴⁷ David B. takes this attack from one of the most celebrated fantasy-adventure comics artists of the previous generation as a harmful reduction, insisting that he is moving on from autobiographical works to concentrate on his fiction. Dupuy and Berberian, of course, have focused primarily upon realist fiction for their entire careers, moving into autobiography for a single book that is intended, at least in large part, to shed light on their relationship to the larger comics community and to each other. Fabrice Neaud, on the other hand, has produced no fictional comics of note and is by far the most militant of the cartoonists discussed in this chapter with regard to the status of autobiography within the field of comics production. These varying dispositions towards autobiography indicate how it is a tool that is taken up by various cartoonists at various moments to signify something about their relationship to the dominant traditions – to shed insight into their work or to oppose the traditions.

Autobiography is not a set of static genre conventions but a tendency that has to be defined in relation to the dominant orthodoxies of the medium at any given historical juncture. Moreover, it is a tendency that can be defined in a variety of ways, depending on the orientation and disposition of the artist. Writing about Marjane Satrapi, *Libération* described *Persepolis* as a book that was filled with 'irony and tenderness, far from the didacticism and the sclerotic heroism that characterize the historical comics.'⁴⁸ This casual opposition – the superiority of an intelligent and engaged autobiographical form of comics set against a vulgarized and debased tradition of genre-fiction – serves to legitimate one tendency of contemporary European comics production at the expense

of a longer tradition. While this is perhaps beneficial for some specific producers of certain forms of comics, it is nonetheless complicated insofar as a great deal of the energy of the new comics movements of the 1990s has been directed towards resurrecting certain genre conventions long perceived as moribund. If autobiography is the commonplace caricature of the art comics of the 1990s, heroic fantasy is increasingly the reality. The impact of the independent generation of European comics publishers on the established houses is the flip side of the aesthetic revolution ushered in by a focus on personal subjectivity.